

Lecture 4 –The Happiness Turn

Dr. Mat Savelli

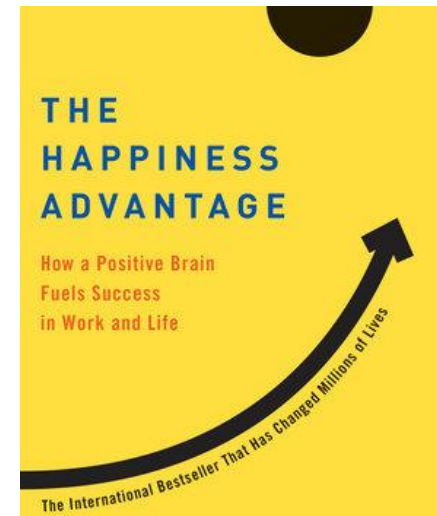
msavelli@mcmaster.ca

Essay

- 1500 words, 1.5 spacing, details on A2L.
- Minimum of six peer-reviewed sources.
- Citations & bibliography in APA.
- Oct 3 v Oct 7 deadlines
- Be sure to answer the question...
- Article databases are your friend.

Into the 21st Century

- From “century of the psy-ences,” to 21st c. entrenchment of psy-knowledge into daily life.
- Psy-disciplines now interested in enhancement, “maximizing human potential.”
- Governance over psychological life increasingly performed by laypeople.
 - Demedicalization or simply the entrenchment of medicalized (psy) knowledge among lay people?
- For some scholars, closely tied to rise of neoliberalism.
 - Market as solution to human problems.
 - Laissez-faire economics.
 - Small state.
 - Emphasis on individualism.



Key Questions

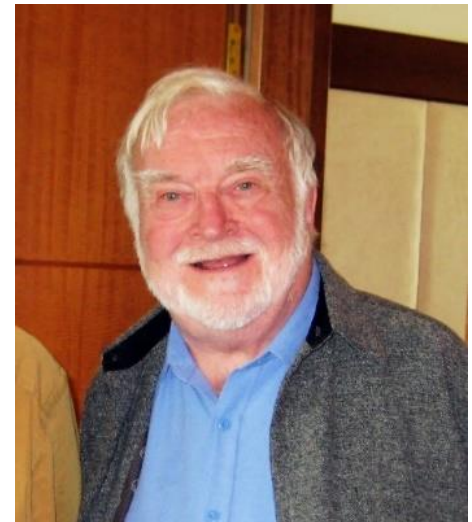
- How can we explain the emergence of positive psychology and how has it impacted our notions of mental health?
- How has positive psychology shaped everyday practices of mental health?
- Where does positive psych and its offshoots fit into broader narratives about the psy-disciplines?
- How has this shift among the psy-disciplines impacted society more broadly?

The Arrival of CBT

- Roots in early 20th c. behaviourism (e.g. Watson, Pavlov, Skinner), itself informed by positivism.
 - Psychology should adopt the scientific method, focus on observable and classifiable behaviour, not introspection.
 - Behaviour as something learned.
- Mid 20th c. recognition that human behaviour is filtered through thoughts:
 - Ellis: distress arises from *thoughts* about an event.
 - Beck: *automatic thoughts* are identifiable and treatable.
- New treatment methods emerge, w/ emphasis on reshaping thoughts. By 21st c., CBT dominant.

Emergence of Positive Psychology

- Against backdrop of cognitive-behaviourists supplanting psychoanalysts, Seligman's "epiphany in the garden" in 1990s.
- As new head of APA, psych must turn away from "the negative" to study the "universal science of happiness."
- Csikszentmihayli: how do people remain strong and happy, despite living in chaos and disruption?
 - "Flow."
- Positive psychology emerges as the study of positive experience, human strengths, virtues.

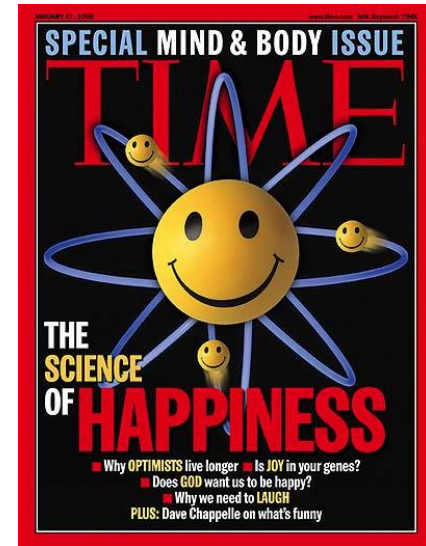


Key Tenets of Positive Psychology

- Emotions learned, cognitive outlook is key.
 - Inverts Freudian theory that thoughts driven by underlying emotions (themselves products of life experiences).
- A positive outlook is good for you, negativity is bad. Happiness has a looping “multiplier effect.”
- Seligman: rather than curing “negative states,” psychology should strive to augment individual’s ability to prevent mental illness and foster mental health. How?
 - Courage, optimism, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, flow, and insight could all be buffers against mental illness.
 - Pursuance of wellbeing, namely positive emotion (the pleasant life), engagement (living in the present), finding meaning in life, having goals and striving towards achievement, and developing relationships.

Explosion of Positive Psychology

- Proliferated through media, academia, professional practice.
- The “science” of happiness: optimism as good for virtually all aspects of life.
 - “Healing effect”, e.g:
 - Fredrickson: positivity undoes damage that negativity causes to cardio system.
 - Segerstrom: positive thoughts boost the immune system.
- PP’s discourse infiltrates everyday practice. Examples?
 - Gratitude exercises, strength-focused business meetings, etc.
- Leads to new wellness industry.



Mindfulness

- From Buddhism to '60s California, simplified for mass consumption.
- Used by PP as teachable technique to guard against mental health problems, increase life satisfaction, aid learning, etc.
- Encourages vigilance against “negative” emotions/thoughts.
- Scholarly critiques:
 - Reveley: imparts self-responsibilization, aligns closely w/ neoliberalism.
 - Barker: despite non-medical practice, reinforces distress and discomfort as illness which necessitates treatment.



The Happiness Turn

- These developments exemplify what scholars call “the happiness turn,” an intellectual and cultural shift.
- Ahmed: taught to believe that (a) happiness is a ‘thing’ – a condition that can be concretely achieved (rather than a conceptual ideal), (b) that happiness is always desirable, and (c) that happiness can be identified and measured.
- Discourse of happiness ubiquitous, defining norms around what is good, desirable, healthy, and prosperous.
- Those who pursue the “right happiness” rewarded. Others punished.
 - Consider “guilty pleasures.”
- Ultimately, happiness as a *choice* that one makes.





Decontextualizing Happiness



- Many scholars have critiqued the Happiness Turn. Why?
 - “Universal truths” about the “science of happiness” often grounded in culture of individualism, encouraging self-focus.
 - Accountability: PP and mindfulness obscure the social for the individual/psychological.
 - Assumptions about what makes happiness possible limited to those in particular contexts.
 - Teaches individuals *they must insulate themselves* against misfortune.
 - Binkley: PP both a response to (and enabler of) neoliberalism and its associated policies (e.g. cutting social safety net).

Science and Positive Psychology

- Scholars: PP envelopes itself within the façade of science.
- Perez-Alvarez: PP uses the social capital of science to mask its underlying ideological character.
- Wilson: mindfulness uses the rhetoric of science to shift expertise (on things like how to live a meaningful life) from religious/philosophical realm to a medical one.
- Others critique the claims made by positive psychology (“happiness makes you live longer!”), arguing that flawed methods have hurt credibility of the discipline.
 - E.g. positive psychology’s *tautologies*: “those who are more satisfied in their life are happier.”
 - PP selective in its logic, e.g. automatic negative thoughts are baseless, but automatic positive thoughts are fine.
 - Other studies cast doubt on benefits of positivity: e.g. “defensive pessimists” might make better decisions than optimists, etc.

Happiness as Imperative

- Cabanas: happiness presented as the logical consequence of following the ‘science’ of happiness functions as a set of “ought tos.” Failing to achieve happiness thus positioned as a sign of individual malfunction.
- Held: the “tyranny of positive attitude:” be happy or face the consequences.
 - Obscures the “benefits of the negative.”
- Ehrenreich (in *Smile or Die*): “Breast cancer...did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a ‘gift’, was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before – one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate.”

Further Critiques of Happiness Turn

- Happiness transformed to something clearly identifiable, measurable, and consumable:
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oF0-28MOoU>
 - Assumes how we “really feel” can be measured biologically (here as a binary). Predicated on a “universal human being” against which all others can be measured.
- Critics: wellness industry preys upon insecurities regarding being well, something felt more keenly since happiness understood as an imperative.
- What we assign as ‘proper’ sources of happiness may police certain activities and prioritize others.
 - It is thus worth asking: who benefits from this vision of happiness? What are the possible outcomes?

Conclusions

- By 21st c. psy-disciplines focused on psyche as learned, rooted in cognitive frameworks.
- Arrival of PP reflects and perpetuates a broader trend wherein human beings imagined as measurable, categorizable.
- Happiness itself redefined: from intangible and personal to *definable, universal, and purchasable*.
- Happiness turn predicated upon a version of selfhood in which we are fully aware of how we feel (and capable of altering how we feel). Promotes individual responsibility for our fate.
- PP pushes psy-practices and knowledge into lay domain w/o inherent demedicalization.
- Claims scientific domain over wider array of human feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.